

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a red long-sleeved dress with a colorful floral pattern, is looking down and slightly to the right. Her hair is blowing in the wind. The background is a soft-focus landscape with hills under a warm, golden light, suggesting sunset or sunrise. A semi-transparent geometric pattern of triangles is overlaid on the entire image. The title text is centered in the upper half, and the author's name is at the bottom.

# WHAT HAPPENS TO CHILDREN WHO DIE?

JOHN ENSOR



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According to the Bible, all people are intricately hand-made creations – knit together in the womb by God’s direct and personal design (Psalm 139:13-15). That design includes knowing Him as our creator and reflecting his glory (Genesis 1:26-27). We do that principally by enjoying Him forever and trusting him daily, that his will for our lives is rooted in his goodness and our happiness (2Thes. 1:11-12).

However, because of our sinful nature we each, in our own way, have turned from trusting God, broken faith with him and gone our own way (Romans 3:9-18). Breaking faith with the eternally good God is an eternally evil sin and the just wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). As all have sinned, all live under the penalty of death, first physically and then, after the Great Day of Judgement, eternally.

Every human being will suffer the just and everlasting judgement of the Lord for their sinful rebellion in one of two ways.

Either, 1) directly and personally on the Day of Judgement (Rev. 20:8), or 2) mercifully, relying wholly on Christ’s substitutionary death in their place, trusting the cross as full punishment paid for the full punishment due for each and all of

our sins (Ephesians 2:1-7). The latter leads to reconciliation with God and life everlasting. There is no other way of salvation from death apart from Christ (John 14:6).

Where does this leave those who are developmentally unable to respond to the call of the gospel? For example, what does the Bible teach us about infants and toddlers, or even unborn children who die from natural causes or abortion?

The Bible does not state, but everywhere implies, that children who die are with God in heaven. How this happens is hidden behind the inscrutable mercy of God. We are not sure how the saving work of Christ is applied to these children but we are sure it does.

One way the Bible implies that children, born and unborn, rest in God's presence is by the use of children as symbols of innocence and trust. They exemplify faith in God. Faith in God is rewarded with eternal life. Children, as symbols of faith, make no sense if children are punished with damnation.

The other way the Bible implies that young children who die are with God is by affirming that hell is the final just punishment for those who consciously reject God's authority over their lives by their unrepentant acts of evil. We are judged for what we do good or evil.

Unborn children and newborn babies do not consciously reject or embrace God. They have a sinful human nature, but have not matured enough to know right from wrong.

Apart from an ability to discern right from wrong, there is no condemnation. How could there be? Final judgement is delayed so that the justice of God's judgment might be evident to all.

But in the case of infants, the reasons for judgment would remain invisible.



### **Where do we see this in Scripture?**

- 1) Infants belong to God in a special and intimate way. Indeed, God calls them “my children.” In Ezekiel 16:21-22, God describes his profound offense at child-sacrifice. In denouncing this wickedness, notice the personal and endearing language God uses for children: “And you took your sons and daughters, whom you had borne **to me...** you slaughtered **my children** and delivered them up as an offering by fire.” (emphasis added)
- 2) God describes children as “having no knowledge of good and evil” (Deut. 1:39). All human beings are conceived with a sinful nature (Psa. 51:5). So, the reference to children not yet knowing good or evil is significant. It implies that accountability for sin only comes when we reach a level of maturity or self-awareness in which we know right from wrong.
- 3) Isaiah makes the same distinction. “For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings” (Isaiah 7:16). Clearly, God views the sins of infants as coming from a form of

innocence, rather than from a discernment of good and evil. And being innocent of what they are doing, implies that they are judged accordingly. As such...

- 4) God's judgement is on the basis of human volition, not human nature. "The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ezekiel 18:20). This implies that children, who have not matured to the point where they can volitionally do right or wrong, cannot be judged on this basis. In this sense, they are innocent.
- 5) God refers to children as "innocents" (Jer. 19:4). This does not mean they are without a sinful nature. But it does imply that they have not matured enough to be judged as moral agents. None of their actions arise out of a volitional intent to sin that would make their punishment just.
- 6) But divine judgement is administered on the basis of sins consciously committed in the body. "For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2Cor. 5:10). That final judgement is pictured in Revelation 20 where all people are present and then prosecuted for their sinful deeds. "The dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (Rev. 20:12).
- 7) When God punished Israel for their sinful defiance in the wilderness, he passed judgement only on those who were of fighting age or older (Deut. 1:39). This shows that culpability for sin comes with maturity.

- 8) God does not punish children for the sins of their parents (Deut. 24:16).
- 9) Job was a righteous man (Job 2:9), who put his hope in God. Deep in the pain of his sufferings, he lamented that he had not been still-born (Job 3:11-15). He thought that his life would be easier had he died at birth. This implies being with God in heaven, not suffering the eternal separation of hell.
- 10) Job 3:16-19 explicitly describes the kind of life that babies who die experience in the afterlife: “There the wicked cease to make trouble [for you], and there the weary find rest. The captives are completely at ease; they do not hear the voice of their oppressor. Both the small and the great are there, and the slave is set free from his master.” This rest is a fitting description of Heaven, not Hell.
- 11) Solomon laments how a man can live a rich life but miss the true and lasting satisfaction of God in his life. “I say that a stillborn child is better off than he” (Ecc. 6:3). The dead child is better off, he reasons, because the child is now at “rest” (Ecc. 6:5). There is nothing about Hell that is restful.
- 12) When David’s infant son was sick, David fasted and prayed that God would spare him. After the child died, David was at peace and submitted to God’s sovereignty. Those around him thought he would wail and lament. David defended his peace with a statement of hope that implies heavenly rest and a future reunion: “I’ll go to him, but he will never return to me” (2Sam. 12:23).
- 13) The bedrock of our trust in God is that he will always act justly (Gen. 18:25).

If babies who died were sent to hell, they would not be suffering justly, as they did not sin in a willful way. In other words, the very justification for hell (namely, as expression of God's justice) is thwarted if infants go there.

14) Jesus blessed little children (Mark 10:16). There are no examples of Jesus blessing anyone who was in open rebellion to God. Again, much like the Old Testament references above, Jesus is creating a category distinction between sinful adults in rebellion to God, and the childlike innocence of children.

15) In Matthew 18:3-5, Jesus uses children as the very example of faith and trust. Child-like faith implies saving faith. He says that "unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child – this one is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

The assumption that makes the analogy make sense is that children demonstrate a faith toward God that is saving.

16) Romans 5:12-14 makes the category distinction between those who sin like Adam (adults) and those who sin because of the imputation of Adam's sin (infants). In making this distinction, Paul is carefully showing how death can reign even over those who don't sin like Adam. He is repeating the theological distinctions made in Deuteronomy 1:39, 24:16, Jeremiah 19:4 and Jonah 4:11, lending theological support to the understanding that infants will not be punished in hell for their sins.



17) Jesus also validates this category distinction when he declares that there are people who die “in their sins” (John 8:24). Everyone who dies, dies because they are sinners by nature. If infants weren’t sinners by nature, they wouldn’t die. But there is a particular class of sinners – namely cognizant adults - that actively reject God, and they are judged accordingly. They “die in their sins” unless they “believe” in Him (Christ) to rescue them.

18) People from every tribe, language, nation and ethnicity will be in heaven (Rev. 5:10). Because so many languages and tribes have died out, this is only feasible through the salvation of infants.

19) Passages that warn of judgement describe in list form the kinds of sins that justify judgement, because they reflect unrepentant hatred for God. None of them describe the unborn or infants. They all reflect the thinking and actions of people who can distinguish between right and wrong. In Matthew 15:19, the list includes “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual; immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies.”

In 1Cor. 6:9-10 says, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God.”

Revelation 21:8 says; “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” People go to hell for what they have done, actions that reflect an unrepentant rejection of God as their Lord. This truth is incomprehensible if infants were sent there.

**SUMMARY:** The category distinction between infant and adult and knowing good and evil is consistent throughout Scripture. It implies that children are loved of God, and welcomed by him (part of his “elect” people). In addition, there are no verses that imply the opposite. Therefore, we may rest in the truth that unborn children, infants and toddlers who die are with the Lord.

**WARNING:** People will twist this truth to justify abortion. *They may say, “It’s better this way. My baby will go to heaven.”* This is demonic thinking. Murdering your two-year-old might also mean that your child goes to heaven. But God condemns murder and warns us that it makes him angry, “their portion shall be the lake of fire” (Revelation 21:8). *They may further say, “I know God will forgive me”* turning the grace of God into a license for evil. This is the proper place for severe warning rather than sweet comfort. God will not be mocked.

**RESOURCES:**

Ronald Nash, *When a Baby Dies* (Zondervan, 1999).

John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Thomas Nelson, 2003).

Visit [www.passionlife.org](http://www.passionlife.org) to explore more resources

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